

NEWS!

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LAKE ADAMHS GRANT HELPS FUND NEW FOSTER CARE YOUTH TRANSITION PROGRAM

A grant from the Lake County Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health Services (ADAMHS) Board will provide crucial funding for a unique new Foster Care Youth Transition program administered through Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Northeast Ohio (BBBSNEO).

The program – the first of its kind in the state – will partner BBBSNEO with the Lake County Department of Jobs and Family Services (JFS) to provide mentoring services for youth who are transitioning from foster care. Tim Kehres, Executive Director of BBBSNEO, says he hopes others in Ohio will take note of and learn from the model being created here and replicate it elsewhere.

He also notes that the need is very real. “As young people age out of foster care, the futures they face are often grim,” he explains. “Statistics tell us that 81% of males will be arrested by age 24; 48% of females will become pregnant by age 19; 22% will experience homelessness; and half will develop substance abuse disorders. We can’t afford to ignore these issues.”

Lake County ADAMHS Executive Director Kim Fraser says there’s a direct correlation between parental substance addiction issues and foster care caseloads.

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“The uptick in the number of children requiring foster care services is very much related to the opioid epidemic.” She explains. “In Ohio a parent’s drug abuse was a factor in at least half of foster care placements. This program will help more people successfully break free from circumstances that have loaded the dice against them.”

She also says the new program offers one more tool for Lake County to use in its already aggressive war against addiction and abuse. “Drug abuse and addiction are nasty enemies to do battle with, but I’m very proud of our efforts here locally,” she said. “We’re working with community partners including courts, first responders, and educators to get the word out about warning signs and resources, and we’re improving access to recovery through initiatives like our Compass Line, Quick Response Team and Opiate Transition Recovery Program. Is abuse and addiction still an issue here? Yes. Are we fighting hard and fighting smart? Yes we are.”

Matt Battiato, Director of the Lake County Department of Job & Family Services, agrees. “While many of the stats are troubling I think it’s important to note that here in Lake County we’ve been able to achieve some success transitioning youth from foster care,” he notes. “Those success stories are largely due to effective collaboration between JFS, the ADAMHS Board, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and other community partners.”

A Foster Care Youth Transition program coordinator will recruit and oversee volunteer adult mentors, and help develop programming, activities, and goals for the

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youth. Mentors will meet weekly with the youth. Some of the activities proposed will focus on things like nutrition, budgeting, etiquette, and career exploration.

Kehres adds that the element of trust will play a key role in the program's success. "One of the things we're keenly aware of is that foster care youth are slow to trust adults," he says. "So we've designed this program with the idea of fostering solid, trusting relationships between the youth and their mentors."

Mindy Hughes, Independent Living Program Specialist for Lake County JFS, is anxious to put the wheels of the new initiative in motion. "I'm excited for another opportunity to partner with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northeast Ohio in their continued commitment to our community's foster youth," she says. "As these young men and women prepare for adulthood, BBBS has been there forming relationships, teaching, role-modeling, and building a foundation for success."

The \$60,000 grant was approved during Monday's regular Lake County ADAMHS board meeting.

BBBSNEO is a Painesville-based agency that serves over 500 children and youth through match programs, and after-school initiatives. The organization has more than 350 volunteer mentors.

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The ADAMHS Board is responsible for planning, funding, monitoring, and evaluating the network of services available for Lake County residents who are dealing with mental illness and/or substance use disorders.

The numbers:

Every year in Ohio approximately 1,000 to 1,400 young people age out of foster care. Foster youths are one of the nation's most vulnerable populations. Consider:

- *81% of males are arrested by age 24.*
- *54% report having at least one mental health issue.*
- *48% of females become pregnant by age 19; 70% by age 21.*
- *33% receive neither a high school diploma nor a GED.*
- *33% have household incomes below the poverty level; three times the average national rate.*
- *25% have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder, compared to 15% of Vietnam War veterans and 12% of Iraqi War veterans.*
- *22% experience homelessness. 40% of the adult homeless population spent some time in foster care.*
- *Only 50% of foster kids who age out of the system will have some form of gainful employment by the age of 24.*
- *There is less than a 3% chance that children who have aged out of foster care will earn a college degree at any point in their life.*

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